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GREENING THE PROFESSION: A MISSING PERSPECTIVE IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN ZIMBABWE

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at social work and environmental problems in Zimbabwe based on perspectives of social work practitioners. Data was collected from 25 social work practitioners from seven non-governmental and governmental organisations in Zimbabwe using in-depth interviews. Two key informant interviews were also done. Social workers said the profession ought to acknowledge the severity and complexity of the environmental problems facing Zimbabwe and reflect this in social work education and practice. It was also said the profession should not stand aside as it is now; but engages itself in green social work to deal with current challenges being caused by environmental crisis. The researcher established that social workers could contribute through enhancing current curricula, engaging in further research and building social awareness through environmental social work.

KEY TERMS: *green social work, strength perspective, social work, Zimbabwe*

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The impact of environmental crisis in developing countries makes it difficult for professions such as social work to remain uninvolved. Environmental pollution and degradation are among the worst ecological crises to which humankind is facing today (Chauhan, 2011; Dewane, 2011; Dominelli, 2012). From its genesis, social work has naturally placed the theme of helping at the centre of professional practice (Morales, Sheafor and Scott, 2010). While social workers are advocates for change and social justice, their involvement in environmental issues in Zimbabwe is still low. Environmental challenges are now a matter of concern in the country, yet the issue is not clearly articulated in both academic and professional social work practice. Using critical theory in social work, Dlamini and Sewpaul (2015) argue that social work practice operates in various structural injustices which need to be awakened to support its clientele system. The mission of social work such as improving of social functioning through fulfilment of basic needs of those who are vulnerable requires that environmental issues are given pertinent attention. In Zimbabwe, social workers in both education and professional practice are not conscious of environmental challenges facing human beings. This is indicated by limited reference to environmental issues in both academic curriculum and professional practice. For example, Newsday (2016) reported that, many parents in Matebeleland North province of Zimbabwe failed to send their children to school due to drought caused by unmitigated climate change. Nevertheless, such issues are not debated in social work profession in Zimbabwe. In concurrence, United Nations (2015) notes that climate change is one of the most pressing global challenges and all governments, businesses and individuals to tackle it. It is therefore, the role of social work to encourage creative ways of working to resolve the challenges vulnerable people face and aims to promote empowerment, enabling people to take action to improve their lives (Brody, 2010). This paper unravels environmental social work from Zimbabwean perspective, considering that the country is among the countries bearing the impacts of environmental crisis.

The ultimate exploitation of nature by people has disturbed fragile ecological balance (Dewane, 2011). The outcome of environmental crisis can explain further why poverty and poor economic production are on the rise in Zimbabwe, though other issues related to public policy are equally significant. One of the compelling reasons for calling green social work in Zimbabwe is the fact that; in view of many, human beings in developing countries are blamed for environmental destruction. It becomes important, therefore, for this paper; to interrogate the position of social workers towards current green movement, dubbed 'green discourse'. More so, concern for environmental justice has increased in recent decades, with incessant debate regarding the major contributor of environmental crisis. The topic on who is guilty of environmental problems can be settled by understanding that this is a multi-system based issue which require multi-systemic approaches. Muzingili (2016) argues that social workers with their eclectic background can understand problems including anthropogenic climate change, the destruction of tropical forests, and depletion of stratospheric ozone and precipitous decline of biodiversity. Gray and Coates (2015) note that, the results of natural disasters related to climate change result in trauma, loss of housing and loss of economic security. Social work as a naturally empathetic profession (Morales *et al*, 2010), is encouraged to re-adjust its approach from purely anthropocentric conception of environment to one including non-humans and the physical world. While social work is not only the profession in the same environmental predicament, it understands better how those consequences affect poor people in the society. It is against this backdrop that the study sought to explore the perceptions of social workers on seriousness of environmental crisis, their knowledge and future role in environmental management in Zimbabwe.

Social Work and environmental justice

The field of environmental justice is closely linked to social justice (Gray and Coates, 2015). However, social work profession has yet to gain a substantive involvement in environmental management efforts in Zimbabwe and beyond. Perhaps, social work has a history of attempting to re-balance distributions of power, while articulating how race, gender and geography affect this allocation (Muldoon, 2010). This experience would be invaluable to communities that live in environments that are threatened or compromised. Social work in Zimbabwe, like elsewhere in the world, is presently confronted with reality that environmental issues present a plethora of challenges to most vulnerable groups in the country. Such challenges include droughts, famines, unclean sources of water, land degradation, torrential floods and unclean air. To exacerbate the already imperious situation, people (social work clients) are employing diverse and complex measures to adjust to these modern environmental challenges. To this effect, environmental paradigm is also embedded in the politics of sustainable development in the post Millennium Development Goals (MDGS) as witnessed at UN general assembly 2015; where world Nations envisioned that sustainable development can be only realised when the natural environment is also stable. The following Sustainable Development Goals pay attention to environmental justice within the discourse of sustainable development agenda.

Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

Source: United Nations, 2015

Green discourse is not just a clarion call for Zimbabwean social workers. Thus the world nations are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations (United Nations, 2015). On developmental and human rights arena, social workers must appreciate that tide has shifted from a purely residual social welfare approach to a more sustainable development agenda encapsulating environmentalism. Therefore, social work practitioners in diverse fields of practice should not sit on their laurels but move with modernity and protect the continued relevance of the profession by paying attention to the impact of environmental issues. For the first time in 2013, the Government of Zimbabwe established the Ministry of Environment, Water and Climate in order to deal with continuous challenges of environmental crisis. This means social workers in Zimbabwe can also join others to protect its clientele, especially the vulnerable people.

Social work has an imperative responsibility to play in shaping an effectual global response to the environmental crisis and to the human rights issues that accompany it (Hawkins, 2000). The profession is exceptionally positioned to face these challenges due to its focus on a social systems theoretical perspective, as well as its advocacy-based and action-oriented framework for practice. In doing this, social work practitioners should acknowledge

that people are embedded in existential dualism with nature. Effective environmental solutions will be predicated on an understanding of and commitment to universal human rights (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012). This encourages Zimbabwean social workers to actively advocate for environmental discourse and pursue sustainable development so that all people can live in a clean, safe, and healthy environment. Gray and Coates (2015) are of opinion that, despite growing literature in environmental social work education; need for fundamental rethinking of the humanistic values and theories informing social work to embrace concerns relating to environmental degradation and climate change is critical.

While calls for environmental justice have grown recently, very little attention has been paid to exactly what the 'justice' of environmental justice refers (Schlosberg, 2007). Schlosberg believes that environmental justice must go beyond the question of distribution. The argument is that the justice demanded by global environmental justice is really threefold: equity in the distribution of environmental risk, recognition of the diversity of the participants and experiences in affected communities, and participation in the political processes which create and manage environmental policy. To this end, environmental justice must integrate issues inclined towards people's participation and recognition not just distribution. The ardent critics of distributive theory of liberalists such as Young (1990) and Fraser (2001) cited in Schlosberg (2007) notes that, distribution is a key element of justice but none of them examine thoroughly the cultural, economic, symbolic and institutional issues underlying that process of distribution. Social workers take on a variety of roles, often acting as a critical friend, broker or advocate, facilitating the support that people need through creative use of all available resources in the society (Brody, 2010). As a result, embracing environmental issues within the dictum of justice is important for social workers. This is because environmental justice seeks a range of interrelated dimensions and conceptions of justice (Schlosberg, 2007). Environmental issues were not within the scope of the profession since its genesis; yet current environmental tides and its consequential impact on vulnerable people require the profession to rise to the occasion and help those who are affected. Green discourse is vital in understanding contemporary issues affecting developing countries like Zimbabwe. Therefore, this article unravels the position of social workers in Zimbabwe with regard to environmental discourse which is now part of global human rights movement.

METHODOLOGY

The qualitative study was conducted in Harare province, Zimbabwe. Seven organisations where social workers are employed participated in the study. The option for Harare province was influenced by factors such as time, convenience and by the fact that most headquarters of participating organisations were located in Harare. The study explored participants' awareness of major environmental issues. In-depth interviews with 25 social workers and two key informant interviews were used to collect data. Social workers who had been in practice for more than three years were more preferred. The 25 participants consisted of six social workers drawn from Department of Social Services, five from academic institutions, 11 from developmental organisations, two from Environmental Management Agency (EMA) and four from National Association of Social Workers of Zimbabwe. Key informants from EMA were interviewed to find out whether there were some environmentally related activities that were executed by social workers in Zimbabwe.

Confidentiality was maintained by the research team. The right of the participants to choose whether to participate or not was maintained during the data collection period. Pseudo names were used to ensure anonymity. All this was done to prevent any form of harm to participants and their organisations. Before the commencement of the data collection, clearance was sought from participating organisations.

Data analysis involved organising data in themes manually. The researcher read responses of participants several times taking note of recurring themes.

RESULTS

Profile of the respondents

Among the participants, eight were aged between 21 and 25 years, while 13 were aged between 26 and 35 years and four were aged above 36 years of age. Of the 25 participants, 17 were holders of Bachelor's degree in social work, while five were holders of Masters in social work degree. Three were doctoral students. Nineteen participants had over three years work experience and six had less than three years.

Perceptions on seriousness of environmental crisis in Zimbabwe

All social workers who were interviewed considered environmental crisis as a serious problem affecting everyone in the country. The main environmental issues that were mentioned by social workers included water pollution, air pollution, man-made disasters, the growing waste, the climate change, the agricultural pollution, the urban problems and the impact on our health of chemicals used in everyday products. One participant noted that:

Environmental crisis is now a reality like globalisation. Its effects are felt by everyone on earth and many stakeholders are starting to respond to tackle its effects. In Africa, economies which are dependent on climate sensitive inputs are now stagnated, not producing goods for its citizens. For example, in Zimbabwe, it is now difficult to predict rain patterns due to climate change (Gerry)

Participants considered environmental issues as a serious problem, because of their effects of animals and humans. However, all participants accepted that there is little being done by the social work profession to deal with environmental issues both in practice and classrooms.

Knowledge of environmental crisis

The study sought to establish the awareness of social workers on environmental crisis in Zimbabwe. It was acknowledged that environmental crisis is now a reality in Zimbabwe and beyond. One of the respondents reiterated that:

Environmental degradation is not only a problem in Zimbabwe but it is a global problem. Everyone is aware about problems which result from environmental problems such as water pollution, deforestation and soil erosion. However, it has affected countries like Zimbabwe severely because we lack proper protective mechanisms (Chidyas).

Upon probing, the majority of social workers admitted that social workers in their professional practice are aware of current problems such as climate change and its implication. Some participants noted that, social workers were not taking into cognisance of these challenges because their focus was on residual social welfare programmes. One participant noted that:

Social workers are aware of current environmental problems but participation in such has been limited by various issues. It is known that social workers in developing countries like Zimbabwe pay much focus on child protection and

other welfare programmes. More so, attaching social work to environment is something new and our curriculums are even afar in teaching such matters in social work institutions (Anesu).

The study discovered that, social work as a profession is yet to be known by many people in the country. Social workers concurred with each other that everyone has responsibility to protect the environment from harm. Key informants said that social workers in Zimbabwe were so peripheral to participate in such current issues. It emerged that social workers in Zimbabwe participate in various environmental programmes such as clean-up campaign but nothing has been done to fully integrate those issues in the profession.

The study also established that, social workers in Zimbabwe appreciate the importance of greening the profession. Some participants reiterated that, failure by social workers to embrace such issues will harm the legacy of the social work profession. One participant retorted that:

Social workers in developing countries should pro-actively participate in politics of green movement. It is the time for social workers to stand up with time and understand the fast changing tides of professional requirements. The profession has strong knowledge base from other professions and those skills can be applied to understand environmental issues at hand (Menard).

While some social workers agreed that environmental problems are known and urgent involvement is needed; they lamented the lean theoretical background of environmental social work. It was noted that, in social science theories, little is taught on environmental theories. As a result, social workers believed that their participation was inhibited by slim theoretical base on nature and human beings. While the word environment is common in social work profession, some social workers felt that the word 'environment' relate to social environment such as family and welfare organisations. Therefore, there was a suggestion that the word environment should apply to physical environment so that it becomes popularised with nature.

Only few social workers articulated the relationship between environmental and human rights issues. It was noted that, environmental issues have direct effects on areas such as human health (especially on breathing problems and allergies), on air pollution and on individual welfare. However, all the participants accepted that environmental protection is very important. One participant summarised the issue of environmental crisis and achievement of human rights as follows:

The relationship between environmental crisis and achievement of social justice is inevitable. We are aware that challenges caused by climatic change and natural disasters have social and economic consequences such as poverty, inequalities and poor production. We all know how shortages of rains and occurrence of floods is leading to series of droughts in Africa. This is affecting vulnerable people who are incapacitated to protect themselves against such challenges. It is a human right issue since the poor are not contributing much to such problems but they are the ones paying the high price of such problems. Therefore, social work profession should quickly address these matters in education and policy options (Ray).

It can be deduced from the above results that some social workers are able to link environmental crisis to human rights abuses. Some participants also believed that social work profession is flexible enough to handle various challenges facing vulnerable people in Zimbabwe and beyond.

Future role of social workers in environmental management

Participants affirmed that, they must contribute as future social workers in the environmental protection. They saw their contribution as future social workers in these aspects: a participation in information and awareness programmes for the population, contribution to different environmental associations, and lobby for environmental protection as fundamental. One social worker noted that;

The contribution of social workers in environmental protection must start in the classroom. Curriculums must be reviewed regularly to accommodate current issues such as environmental challenges (Funny).

In supporting the same opinion, another social worker expressed that

Social workers must be flexible enough in fulfilling their responsibilities. Adopting environmental social work will enable them to expand their knowledge base and opportunities in understanding the interaction between human beings and their nature (Komboni).

Social workers were optimistic that they could contribute towards environmental protection in their city or village in the following ways: raising public awareness about environment; organizing activities for cleaning their city or village; implementation of environmental protection legislation; participation in environmental organizations; for organising a lot of campaigns in order to inform; and sensitize people to environmental protection, and cooperation with competent authorities in order to reduce environmental pollution and to protect the forests.

DISCUSSION

From the study, social workers admitted that, environmental issues were important in their practice in Zimbabwe. Integrating environmental issues in social work profession, affirm interdependencies between people, their physical, social, political, economic and cultural environments as part of one whole. This argument is in line with the theory of existential dualism which notes that humans are embedded in the ecosphere and coevolved along other species. It was observed from the study that the discourse of green social work is lowly prioritised in Zimbabwe due to; continued focus on residual social welfare approach, lack of social work visibility in social policy issues and insensitive social work curriculum to contemporary global issues. However, Nesmith and Smyth (2015) believe that social worker fails to participate in environmental issues not because they are not exposed to it but it is social work curricula which makes them unprepared to handle such challenges.

It was established from the study that environmental issues are part of human justice discourse which social workers in Zimbabwe should pay attention since it affects the well-being of people. Therefore, scholar like Wronka (2008) believes that, a healthy environment is a human right. Participants noted that, it is time for social work profession to consider environmental issues in its practice. This harmonises with Miller et al (2012) who noted that, it is necessary for the contemporary social work profession to acknowledge the consequences of environmental injustice on vulnerable populations and begin to engage in such work, which may lead to a better understanding of the disproportionate effect that environmental degradation has on minority and poor communities. The study did explore the awareness of

social workers on environmental issues and its impact on social work clients, yet little is being done to deal with such problems in terms of current social work education in Zimbabwe.

Participants pointed out that poor people are the most affected with environmental disasters; and environmental justice is a primary tool in reducing inequalities among people. This reflects an observation by Bolan (1994:146) who noted that: “the threads linking environmental pollution and social welfare stand much more exposed under extreme conditions.” From the study, it was revealed that Zimbabwean social workers have a huge responsibility in environmental management such as; initiating environmental awareness campaigns and helping in the implementation environmental management legislations. From green discourse model, it is espoused that environmental crisis result in poor being denied opportunities to participate and get recognition in issues which affect them. This is a human rights issue, and perhaps social workers in Zimbabwe are urged to begin to mobilise around notions of appropriate distribution of resources and responsible management of bio-space. Scholars like Gray, Coates and Tian (2013) acknowledged that, environmental social work is best suited in utilising limited natural resources such as land, air, water, energy sources and minerals for the benefit of all rather than the privileged few. Such acknowledgement is not at variance with Dominelli (2013:431), who recommended ‘a new paradigm’ for practice rooted in environmental justice that enhances the well-being of people, the flora, fauna and the ecosystem that sustains and supports us all; green social work, for practitioners supporting life in one interdependent world. As acknowledged by the participants, green social work is now well known in Zimbabwe but its integration in social work practice will make the profession better and relevant to contemporary challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving social work visibility

In Zimbabwe, social work is not popular like in other countries. As noted in the study, the profession is misrepresented and it is mainly attached to child protection and other welfare programmes. It is therefore important to clearly demonstrate the role of the profession and its versatility in handling various problems affecting diverse communities. This can further enable social workers in Zimbabwe to participate in environmental management policies and programmes.

Further research on environmental issues

While there is a growth in awareness of environmental justice, the topic is still under-acknowledged and under-researched in the social work profession. There is lack of available information on the important role and involvement of social work in environmental concerns. It is therefore crucial for social workers, current and future, to start researching on environmental issues to improve profession’s literary rigour and knowledge base.

Greening the classroom

It is important that social work courses and field education offer students the opportunity to engage with environmental topics and social work. This is necessary for the future of the profession if social work is to become involved as a major stakeholder in environmental justice debate. Constant curriculum review to improve social work education training and interventions is necessary.

Professional collaboration

Shifts could begin through collaborating with other disciplines such as Environmental Science and Environmental Sociology. Incorporating knowledge from other disciplines will allow social work to evolve and determine responses to the present issues pertaining to the environment and its effects on individuals.

CONCLUSION

In Zimbabwe, social workers in both academic and professional practice have been slow to embrace environmental issues. Professional social workers in various fields are reminded to re-think their practice so that they come to terms with new environmental responsibilities. As this paper argued, incorporation of environmental issues in social work practice is a human rights issue. As deliberated in the study, if environmental issues become an integral part of social work's remit, the profession can continue to retain its currency in the modern world and emphasize its relevance to the social issues that societies have to resolve in the modern day.

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